As Sweet As Pomegranates

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As Sweet As Pomegranates

by Sleepyspacesocks

Summary

Will is a boy who promises to never go through the back gate, to avoid the fey and the monsters that make that space their home. But what happens when Will breaks that promise? When he catches the eye of the most powerful monster in the woods?

Hannibal is a monster who makes his home in the forest. But what happens when a human wanders into his domain? A human who is more than he seems?

Maybe this hunt will end with Will finding his way to Hannibal's dinner table as a guest of honor rather than the main dish. But is that what Will wants? Or does he just want to go home?

- Inspired by The Hermit and the Wendigo King by DarkmoonSigel

Chapter 1

Will sits in the grass next to his mother who is hanging up laundry on a drying rack. The sun is bright overhead, practically blinding and Will is threading together daisies into a flower crown.

“Never trust a fey,” his mother tells him and Will tilts his head, confused. His eyes remain glued to the flower crown that he is threading together, but his mother knows that he is listening.

“They always screw you over. The sweetest honey to attract the flies,” his mother pauses as she pulls out a small yellow shirt of Will’s, the elbows are stained by dirt and grass and his mother makes a face at the small hole on the bottom edge.

She clips it up anyway and walks over to where Will is sitting, pressing a kiss to the top of his head, “Never go through the back gate, or step into a fairy circle, do not eat their food, or give your name, don’t be rude, and make sure that you never owe a fey a debt because you’ll always pay for it,”

Will nods, his flower crown finished, and plops the object of his labors onto his curls. He stands and goes to run back inside to show it to his dad, but hesitates instead, perhaps hearing the seriousness in his mother’s voice.

His mom watches with a frown on her face. Will turns and meets her eyes, “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

She lets out a deep breath as though his words have lifted a weight off her chest, “Okay,” she says and her frown curves upwards into a smile. “Cause any fey would be glad to…” she begins to run towards Will who takes off, “eat you up!!”

Will is giggling when his mom finally catches him, wrapping him up in her arms and holding him close to her chest as he wiggles and squirms.

She only releases him when his flower crown tumbles to the grass.

“My lovely little prince,” his mom teases him with a grin, brushing off any dirt that has gathered on the flower petals before setting it gingerly back on Will’s head, “let’s go show your dad, okay? It’s almost time for lunch anyway,”

Hand in hand the two of them walk back to the old farmhouse.

Over ten years later Will stands in front of the gate at the back of their property, ready to break this promise. Do promises have expiration dates? He supposes if they do this one is long past expired.

He knows that a part of him clung to it. Maybe he remembered the seriousness on his mother's face, the heaviness of her warning, it doesn't matter. He stayed away from the gate at the back of their property and any fairy circle he saw he avoided.

Eighteen year old Will is done keeping a promise to a mother who left him behind. Fairies, princess, happily ever afters, these are things that he'd stopped believing in when his mother disappeared without even a note on the fridge. No more flower crowns and picture books. Just dishes that hadn't been done and a dad who couldn't stop drinking.

So the truth is that when Will opens the gate in the back and steps through it is his own fault. It's his anger at the world, at the unfairness of it all, at his parents for leaving him, one to death and the other to his vices, that compels him forward.

Will almost wishes he were drunk. That'd have been easier. To blame it on the lack of sobriety, the alcohol running through his veins numbing his thoughts, leading him astray. Or he could've even blamed it on his feet which sometimes acted on their own, taking him down narrow country roads that lead him far from home. He'd wished on one occasion that he might be able to pick up his feet and demand answers. Ask them what it is that they are running from.

But today there was no alcohol, nobody to blame but himself when he latches the gate with a dull thunk behind him and steps through.

A strange feeling comes over him like the sensation of breaking through the surface of a murky pond. His head coming up and his body emerging from the scum, a sticky feeling on his skin. Only he doesn't emerge onto rocks warmed by afternoon sun, but shadowy tree cover.

Will is suddenly surrounded by long dark shadows that weave together and sway back and forth like spectators trying to get a glimpse of a gladiator that has stepped into the ring.

He can see distant sunshine peeking through the trees. Hear the whispering of wind through leaves and something scurries through the bushes to his left.

These are not the sunny hills that should lie beyond the gate. The trees stretch too tall, too old, to be the ones by his home.

Will reaches back nervously, keeping his eyes wide, but his hand does not land on the gate as he expects it to, just falls through the air. He turns, thinking that he'd likely taken a few steps forward, the gate just a little farther behind him than he realized, but when he turns and looks he sees that behind him there is only the dark shadowy woods.

The gate is gone.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Will's dad notices his son's disappearance.

Chapter Notes

I debated putting this chapter later on, but stuck it here instead. I hope you enjoy it!

It takes over a day for Will's dad to notice his son's absence. This is not unusual, Will and his dad were once planets orbiting the same sun, but now they have fallen out of alignment, shuffling by each other, the space in between them seemingly insurmountable.

The old house is quiet when Frank Graham comes home from work. He thinks nothing of it. Will is a quiet kid, shy and awkward. Even together the two of them are never loud enough to fill in the dark cracks and spiderwebby corners.

Frank grabs a beer from the fridge and some leftover Mac and cheese. He figures that his son likely has already eaten. It's half past eight. If anyone had asked about it he'd say that work kept him late. Truth is that he never really wants to come home until he has to.

He puts on the television and kicks his feet up. Frank passes out just before midnight with his jeans still on.

The next morning he gets no response when he hollers up the stairs to ask Will if he'd like some coffee, but shrugs it off. Teens sleep in late. He goes to work.

When Frank comes home it's earlier than usual. He doesn't see Will sitting at the kitchen table working on his homework like he expects to, so he makes his way to his son's room. It's dark.

Empty.

Back in the living room, Frank calls Will and hears his son's phone ring distantly. Frank follows the noise to Will's bedside table. Wherever the kid is, his phone is not on him.

Frank then makes a few more calls, but everywhere it's the same. Nobody knows where Will is.

Frank tries to convince himself that it is something simple. Will staying out late. Perhaps he went to a party or is having a sleepover with a friend. Maybe he's finally hooking up with someone. God knows Frank had quite a few late night escapades at Will's age.

Except that Will isn't like that. Will is a loner. Not many friends, never mentioned any girls. Will doesn't go to parties, he hadn't had a friend over since he was ten and even that had been a forced play date. A concerned next door neighbour who'd brought over casserole and condolences.

Frank calls the police at midnight when Will hasn't returned.

"My son is missing,"

"Okay," says the cop who picked up the phone. In Frank's opinion they seem far too cheerful as they take in the news. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Yesterday morning. Before I left for work."

He can almost hear the cop nodding along, and does hear the click of a pen and a few hums as she tries to get more details.

"I'm going to need you to fill out a missing person report. It's a quiet night. How about I send over an officer, they can help you get started on that."

"Okay," Frank responds and gives them his address.

Then he sits there and waits. His wife would've known what to do. She always had plans for things like this. He didn't. The cop, when she arrives, has a clipboard and a clean uniform, one so wrinkle free it looks ironed, and she fakes concern so well he almost believes it's real.

"You'll find him," she promises, "cases like this usually get resolved on their own and even if something has happened, we'll find him pretty quick."

He fills out the report. Lists his son's weight, hair colour, health condition, all the random mumbo jumbo they wanted. The clothes he figured Will was likely wearing: brown boots and a green coat, both items that usually sat by the front door but were conspicuously missing from the house. Just like his son.

The cop continued to monologue, moving into statistics she thought might be comforting, "about seventy five percent of missing people are found within the first twenty four hours and that's higher for kids. How old is your son anyway?"

"Eighteen."

"Well there you go! I know I did some pretty crazy stuff at eighteen. Chances are that he'll be back before you know it."

He grunts and she takes it as agreement, letting more comforting phrases spill out of her mouth.

“I’m sure he’s okay,” “It’ll all work out,”

It only makes him feel worse.

He hands over the paper anyway. All the boxes are filled in with a dark pen, his handwriting neat and cramped into the little spaces.

The cop smiles at him condescendingly when she grabs it, “get some sleep okay? Things always seem brighter in the morning,”

Frank wants to slap her. Instead he bids her goodbye and stares out the window into the darkness beyond hoping to see the flash of a red coat or hear a fiddling at the door.

“I’m home!” he imagines Will calling out. Only Will would never do that. He’d just open the door quietly, no explanation, make his way to the kitchen to get a snack. Maybe he’d nod to Frank as he passed by, maybe not.

Even so the quiet seemed all that much louder without the small noises of life that usually issue from Will’s room. The grumble of the radiator, the rush of the shower water or the faucet as he brushes his teeth, a click of keyboard keys, a few sighs, the flip of pages and the scratch of pens on paper.

In the absence of it, the house seems like a dark tomb with Frank sealed inside it.

The next morning Frank wakes with a headache. He checks Will’s room. The bed is still empty. Frank calls in sick to work and walks the edge of the property line. Sometimes Will liked to wander. Frank just hopes Will isn’t dead in a ditch somewhere.

Frank passes by the gate at the back of their property, but it’s locked as always. Beyond it only sunny hills and the neighbour’s house with their immaculate roses and carefully tended fuchsias. He asks, but the neighbours haven’t seen Will.

He calls a few more people, walks around town asking shopkeepers. Nobody knows anything. It’s frustrating. It is as if Will had simply just disappeared.

Frank knows though that Will isn’t that kind of kid. Doesn’t have a car, doesn’t have a girlfriend, couldn’t have gone far on foot, it doesn’t make any sense. Frank walks back to his now truly empty house without any more of an idea of where Will could be.

Sitting in his living room, the silence seems suffocating. He downs another beer.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Will stumbles his way into the nest of a rather nefarious fey.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will carves a small X into the tree in front of him with his folding knife. Sap weeps onto his fingers as he roughly cuts through the flesh of the cedar and leaves his hands sticky. He inspects his carving and finds it satisfactory. A starting point that he can come back to. It seems right even if he doubts it will help. The gate shouldn't have opened into a forest. It should have been sunny hills and white picket fenced homes beyond the creaking metal latch.

However the X does make Will feel better about plucking his way onward through the trees. In search of something. A way out? The fence? He isn't sure what he believes or what he even should be looking for.

Underfoot the ground is soft and wet. His shoes sink through leaf piles and into mud. The whole forest smells sickly sweet like rot and decay. Something howls in the distance, long and mournful. He pauses for a minute and glances back at his tree, marked with his X. It's barely visible, small and crudely carved as it is. He marks another. A trail of breadcrumbs that will not get eaten up or lifted away by the wind.

He continues along in this way for quite some time. Marking trees, walking a few hundred metres, marking another, until the sun is lower in the sky and a hazy sort of sunset light makes the forest glow in reds and oranges. His folding knife is now totally sap covered and the blade dulled.

Will is thirsty. It was late afternoon when he'd opened the gate and that had been a few hours ago. In his pockets he has only a few stale dog biscuits and seventeen dollars. Nothing he can eat or drink. He's beginning to wonder if he should climb a tree to see if he might be able to spot a river or a town, when in the distance he sees a curl of smoke. He approaches the house cautiously. Its a simple log cabin. The voices that drift out from within are those of a family at dinner: idle chatter and a young girl's shrill laugh.

He knocks loudly three times and steps back to wait.

He hears the pause in conversation and then a shuffling of feet before the door swings open to reveal a tall figure. Large grey wings shift on it's back, the tips black. White stripes running the length of them. A band of black feathers wraps around its head like a zorro mask framing pitch black beady eyes. Instead of a mouth the figure has a sharp beak.

“Hello,” the birdman greets him before Will can sprint away and claim that this was all a mistake. Find a place to stay the night far away from this craziness.

“Hi,” Will waves nervously, pasting a strained smile on his face as he tries to look away from the birdlike features and into the man’s beady black eyes, “I’m lost. You don’t know the way back to Wolf Trap do you? I mean, where am I? What are you? Is that rude? I’m sorry. I’m just…” Will made a vague hand gesture to indicate general confusion about the situation and the birdman frowns in a show of sympathy.

“I’m sorry about…” the birdman trails off rather than specifying, but Will gets the sense that an ‘all that’ was implied. “My name is Hobbs. If you want to come inside, my daughter and I are eating dinner. You can join us.”

Will hesitates and his mother’s warnings flash in his mind. Don’t be rude, don’t owe them, don’t eat their food. “I actually think that I’m good. I’ll be on my way now.”

He goes to leave, but Hobbs grabs his arms, sharp fingernails digging into Will’s skin. “Come inside. I insist. I could never allow a wanderer such as yourself to spend the night in the woods when I happen to have a spare bedroom,”

Will’s heart stutters and he wonders in a daze of distant panic if all of this is a dream. A vivid hallucination. This thought seems almost encouraging and is what allows him to nod his head despite the panic welling up in his stomach. It’s just a dream. His dream. He’ll wake up if something truly terrible happens.

It’s not a dream, whispers a voice in his head, it’s too real to be a dream. If you die here you’ll be dead for good. He ignores that nagging and gives another shaky smile to the birdman who pulls him inside and shuts the door behind him.

The house is cozy. A fireplace blazes in the corner and the dinner table is set with plates of food. The other inhabitant is a girl who is slightly less birdly than the man who Will presumes to be her dad, but no more human. She also has large wings, but in the place of a beak she has wickedly sharp teeth.

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?” Hobbs asks as he makes his way towards the kitchen.

“A glass of water would be nice,” mumbles Will as he continues to hover by the doorway staring down at his shoes. They are tracking mud all over the floors. He wonders if he should take them off, but neither Hobbs nor his daughter comment on it.

Hobbs nods, fills Will a glass, and hands it to him. He drinks it gratefully.

“Why don’t you take a seat?” asks Hobbs as he pulls out a chair, “I’m always happy to have a guest for dinner.”

Will shivers despite the heat emanating from the fireplace. He shakes his head, “No thank you. I think that I’d best be on my way.”

Hobbs frowns at him and takes a few steps closer. Will smiles awkwardly before turning to open the door and make a graceful exit back into the woods where he can feel some semblance of balance once more. The door does not open.

Hobbs takes another step forward and grabs a knife off the countertop. The same knife that he'd been using to chop up carrots for the salad.

"Leaving so soon? That's impolite," Hobbs asks as he steps forward threateningly.

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry I gotta," he fiddles with the knob more forcefully. It still refuses to open. His chest feels tight. His hands start to shake. He thinks that he can feel sweat beginning to collect on his forehead.

Then the birdman lunges forward and Will dodges out of the way with an admittedly unmanly shriek. So stupid, he berates himself, should've trusted my instincts.

He throws himself towards Hobbs hoping to unbalance him and makes a frantic grab for the knife. A flap of wings and the birdman brings the knife down into Will's shoulder. His skin gives in and the knife buries itself deep in his flesh. The pain is sharp and burning, spreading through his arm like licks of fire.

A shout of pain slips through his lips and Hobbs grins. He goes to yank the knife out, but Will takes it as an opportunity lashing out with his other hand, his sap-covered knife clutched between his fingers. He slashes across one of Hobbs' eyes.

Hobbs shrieks and out of the corner of his eye Will sees the daughter sprint out of the room and down a hallway, disappearing until danger passes. Smart girl, thinks Will distantly.

The man moves forward and makes an attempt to grab for his knife which is still buried in Will's shoulder, but before he can Will takes his knife and slashes at Hobbs' neck.

Hobbs stumbles and Will takes his knife and slices once more, leaning into it a bit more to dig deeper into the flesh of Hobbs' throat. The birdman drops to the floor dead.

He stares down at the gurgling blood that seeps into the wood floor and unbidden a grin spreads across his face. He is the victor. The winner of this fight. Something in him sings with glory. The hunter has become the hunted. For a brief moment he wants to lean down like an animal, sink his teeth into his kill and consume it. He wants to shred apart the one who threatened his superiority and decorate his home with evidence of his strength. Undefeated, alive, victorious.

Then, Will sinks to his knees beside the man he has killed, his legs collapsing beneath him. The adrenaline begins to wear off and Will finds himself lightheaded with blood loss and shaking like a leaf. His knife slips out of his hand and clatters to the floor.

Above him, on the table lay two half eaten plates of food that are now cooling. Next to him, a dead body. Somewhere in the house a girl might be hiding, one who will have just lost her father. He puts his head between his legs. What has he done?

He pinches himself, but does not wake up.

Several hours later Will sits down again at the table. He has cleaned his shoulder and wrapped it with bandages he found in the bathroom. The food is now cold as is the corpse that Will threw out back. He'd found the key to the door on Hobbs' body. There was no sign of the girl and the window in the bathroom hung open letting in cold evening air. He supposed it was something to be grateful for. He has no idea what he would've done had he found her.

He is too nauseous to eat, but searches the cupboards anyway for something he might be able to stow away. He'd found an old backpack in the room that he assumed was the daughter's and had filled it with a blanket, the first aid kit, and a water bottle already. He will leave tonight, spend the night somewhere less cursed than this tiny cabin where he has committed his first murder. He knows that even if he were to stay, sleep would likely evade him. May as well hike on.

But just as he shoves the kitchen knife he'd used into the backpack he sees something moving out the window. He pauses, key in his hand and peers into the darkness outside wishing that he'd found a flashlight in his search.

He peers out the window and sees Hobbs' face staring back at him. The blood has drained from his face leaving it deathly pale and Will can see red dripping from his neck where it was sliced open.

"You did this," it hisses, and the voice echoes around Will clearly despite the glass separating them. "See," it commands and Will scrambles back from the window as it, the phantom of his victim, steps closer.

Will trips over a chair in his haste to distance himself. He cries out as his left arm shoots back to grab the table. A bolt of pain lances through his shoulder. When he recovers Hobbs is gone again. Nothing but trees swaying outside the windows of the cabin.

He goes out the back door and to his relief the body is still there just like he left it. Staring at him with dead eyes that seem accusing.

"You did this, you did this, you did this," his mind (or Hobbs?) screams at him and he hurries back inside, letting the door lock behind him.

He finds himself running into the bathroom where the girl escaped and he slams the window shut. Sealing himself in the house. Sealing everything else out. He cowers in the bathtub before he gains the courage to get up and lock the bathroom door too. He spends the night huddled in the corner on the tile floor, wrapped up in his blanket. Every time he shifts his shoulder burns. He'll leave in the morning. Things will be clearer in the morning. He rummages about in his backpack and swallows two aspirins. The pain slowly eases back to a dull ache and against his own wishes he falls asleep huddled there in the corner.

The next morning when he steps outside onto the porch with his backpack on his back and a granola bar in his hand. Hobbs lies where Will left him, but his stomach has been ripped into

by hungry scavengers, his organs spilled out into the dirt and half eaten. Will swallows his vomit and pockets his granola bar before making his way towards the rising sun and away from the corpse rotting by the cabin. If he's found his way to purgatory then he can find his way out of it even without an angel of the lord and a vampire guide to help him do it.

Chapter End Notes

I promise that Hannibal is coming! The next chapter is all him. I just had to set up Will's POV first.
This chapter took me forever to write, especially the scene where Will fights with the shrike. Ugh I really just have no idea how to write combat, but I tried my best. Hope you guys don't mind how I just had Abigail hightail it out of there. I debated doing more with her, but I wanted to keep the story pretty simple and wasn't sure how to fit her into it.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A short chapter on Hannibal's POV in all this.

Chapter Notes

Just to clarify since I saw a comment about it Hannibal did not eat Hobbs. Hannibal isn't a scavenger. He kills his own meat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal is not expecting a letter, but he ushers Franklyn in anyway when the fairy knocks at his door.

"I've bought some blackberries that I saw on the way over here. They reminded me of the shirt you were wearing the last time we met up, it was such a nice shade. They're in season, you know. The berries I mean," the neurotic little fairy informs him as he flits about, glitter falling from his wings to gather on the floor. Hannibal eyes it and makes a mental note that he's going to have to sweep up once Franklyn leaves.

"You shouldn't have," Hannibal says dryly as he stares at the bowl of berries that Franklyn clutches in his sweaty, sticky and stained palms. The letter Hannibal is handed also has a stain in the corner, the shade very similar to the shirt Hannibal had worn the last time he'd seen Franklyn. It was a nice shirt, but he now feels an overwhelming urge to burn it.

"I'll just leave the berries here, okay? You can eat them later," Franklyn sets the bowl down on the corner of Hannibal's desk. He can see that the sticky juice that has found its way onto the bottom of the bowl and begins to seep into the wood.

"Thank you Franklyn, although I do prefer meat,"

Franklyn blushes, a combination of pleasure from the praise and embarrassment at his gift being less than perfect, "Of course. I know, I know. I've heard ravings from the other fey about your dinner parties. Fairies of my kind don't usually enjoy fresh meat, but if that's been holding you back from offering me an invite, I assure you that it's not a problem. I can be quite adaptable," Franklyn winks with this last comment and Hannibal forces a polite smile.

"I have not had a feast in quite some time,"

“Oooh perhaps one is due then! There’s a human,” Franklyn points to the still unopened letter in Hannibal’s hands.

The letter is from Ms. Lounds. The young fairie is a well renowned gossip and can filter out the nonsense that the trees usually spit out into actual news. She doesn’t come in person of course, much too busy for that, but she sends letters to all of the important figures in the forest. She’s always been good at keeping the powerful pleased with her.

“I’m intrigued,” Hannibal admits and then turns his attention to the contents of the envelope. He hopes that this will be a subtle signal for Franklyn to go.

The actual contents of the letter is just as intriguing as most of Ms. Lound’s messages. ‘The Chase Begins?’ is the title. Rather than the usual pen and paper that most of the residents prefer, Ms. Lounds has stolen herself a printer and delights in its use to send tabloids.

A human coming into the forest is unusual, but does occur every couple of months. Any fey who seeks human flesh more often than once or twice a year must travel outside the forest to obtain it and only a few do with the risk of exposure often being deemed too dangerous.

Hannibal grins. It seems the hunt for the little human has begun. He hopes that watching this rabbit hop will offer him better entertainment than the last.

Franklyn is still watching him nervously as Hannibal rises from his chair having, as usual, not taken the hint to leave.

“So? What do you think? A human! How exciting! Cause enough for a feast. I have a friend, Tobias and he owns a music shop. A little violin music could spice up the gathering. Or perhaps you’re more into classical? I have heard that you frequent the opera and even leave the woods to see humans perform it. Of course I’m sure whatever feast you have prepared the food would be art enough. I could bring a cheese plate. I’m a cheese person you know,”

Hannibal sighs, “I will think about it, Franklyn, but it’s hardly appropriate for me to invite a patient to a party of mine. For now, I’ll be off. I will see you next week at your appointment.”

“Of course, of course. Can I ask… where are you headed? Perhaps I might join you if it’s on my way,”

“To see the human,” Hannibal says and steps out of his office.

Franklyn stutters out something, but rude as it may be, Hannibal is no longer listening. He waits for the fairie to fly through the door before he closes and locks it.

He shifts into his ravenstag form and takes off into the woods in search of wandering prey.

He does not have to search for long. The human is making it spectacularly easy. Trampled branches, disturbed animals, and most obvious of all a path of trees which bleed sap where they have been cut into by a knife.

The trail leads him, of course, to the human.

The human is not what Hannibal was expecting. He is not human. Or perhaps not JUST human, for Hannibal can sense the human blood gushing through his veins, but he can also tell that it has been tainted by a darkness, a hazy sweetness that he can almost taste on his tongue. He wonders how anyone could have been so mistaken in assuming this creature was simply another pig.

He watches the boy. To Hannibal he seems excruciatingly young, but such is the case with all but the oldest of humans, so the boy's actual age is hard for him to pin down. The boy picks his way through the woods and Hannibal follows at a distance watching as the boy steps into the home of Garret Jacob Hobbs.

Hobbs is not a fey that Hanibal has had much contact with, but he knows of the man through rumour. The Shrike is what the other fey call him and Hannibal has often heard it mentioned that he is very picky about what he eats. Preferring to eat only teenage girls who resemble his own daughter. Even so, Hannibal doubts that Hobbs would turn away a human that turns up at his own doorstep just because he doesn't quite fit with Hobbs' preferences.

Hannibal watches as the ignorant human walks into the shrike's nest and contains his sigh. Just another bunny lured in by the promise of a treat. Even so something keeps him there, watching through the windows as the drama unfolds.

The fight that Hobbs and the boy engage in is brutal and bloody. To Hannibal it is beautiful. Though the human blood still pumps through the boy's viens, the darkness seems to emerge like creeping shadows that wrap their hands around Hobb's neck and pull him down. The boy is radiant this way. The brightest light casts the darkest shadows and the boy is glowing.

The boy smiles down at the corpse that lays by his feet and Hannibal itches to transform back into a human, to grab a piece of paper and capture this moment in graphite. The boy's cheeks flushed with exertion, panting slightly, his mouth curved into a crooked grin, his curly hair dishevelled. More than even that Hannibal wants to touch.

He aches with his need to go to the boy. To unlatch the cabin door and pull the boy into his chest. To run his hands through those locks, to whisper praise into the boy's ear as the boy collapses into Hannibal, exhaustion from his fight catching up to him. Hannibal wants to take him home, tend to his wound, bathe him, dress him in the finest silks and feed him Hannibal's kills. He wants to claim, to possess, to encourage and to cherish. He wants the boy.

This sudden epiphany is surprising, but rather than a rude surprise, it is a lovely one. It seems that this will be a hunt afterall, but hopefully in the end the boy will find his way to Hannibal's dinner table as a guest of honour rather than a main dish.

Hannibal leaves the boy in Hobbs' cabin with the boy's first kill and feels jubilant. After all the boy's becoming has just begun. Yes, Hannibal thinks, a feast, a feast is due. Franklyn of course will not be invited.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn’t resist adding on Franklyn! Hope y’all enjoyed this chapter as much as I did. It was real fun for me to write.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Will is not alone out in the woods.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will hikes through the forest aimlessly and doesn't mark any more trees. He has an idea of what he's looking for, but it's a lose one. Water would be good. Food and shelter are also things that he knows he will eventually need. Sometimes as he's walking he wonders why he left the cabin. A dumb choice prehaps to leave behind something definite, but when he thinks about settling down in that cabin he cannot imagine being happy. He doesn't think he would've been able to stomach scrubbing the blood out of the wood floors or sleeping in the bed of the man he murdered. So he continues forward into the unknown.

The day passes without much incident and he's settling down for lunch when he hears a snuffling in the woods. A huff of breath that disturbs the shrubbery. Something is there.

'It's him,' says the voice in his head, 'the birdman that you killed. He's coming for you. He never really died. What do you know about the fey anyone? Did you check for a heartbeat?'

'He died. I know that he died,' Will argues back, 'we saw his dead body. It's probably just a rabbit or something,'

'Too big to be a rabbit. It's coming to kill you just like he was. You're not safe. You'll never be safe, not out here, not all alone. Easy prey, easy pickings,'

A few branches break to his left and he turns, grabbing at the knife in his pack. A low growl comes from the trees and it echoes through the woods. Red eyes, red eyes glowing in the shadows. Did Hobbs have red eyes?

'See, see,' blood leaking into the dirt, spilling towards him, pooling at his feet, staining the tree near him, 'see, see, see,' blood on his knife, rusted by the iron, how many were killed by the knife he now holds?

Blood drips from the leaves nearby the rhythm of it whispering 'see, see, see, see,' with each drop that plops onto the dirt. He pushes through the bushes and prepares to bury his blade into the throat of his foe…

It's just a dog. He pauses with the knife drawn and then lowers it slowly.

Maybe it's not just a dog. Maybe this is a shapeshifter trying to take advantage of his dog related sympathies by posing as a pup. Maybe he should still be wary, but he realises that the blood isn't Hobb's it's the pup's.

Before him lies an injured dog. It's leg has tooth marks in it where some other wild beast attacked and it has red cuts on its flank from claws. He sighs and stows his knife. Shapeshifter or not, dogs are his weakness.

The dog tilts its head at him confused. It's drooling and eyeing the food in his hand with a lot of interest, but is wary of this stranger especially in its weakened state.

"What's wrong boy?" Will asks quietly as he approaches, palms up in an attempt to appear non-threatening. It growls at him.

He gets down low on the ground and rummages around in his pockets. He grabs an old dog treat, it's stale and has been sitting in there for who knows how long, but he proffers it anyway, "I don't mean you any harm, okay? Just two of us out here and I thought, I don't know we could keep each other company. I got your back, you got mine. I can clean out those cuts too."

The dog eyes him warily, but the growling weakens a bit.

Will crouches low to the ground and breaks off a bit of treat which he tosses in the general direction of the pup.

It side-eyes him, but inches its way forward, nose twitching nervously.

Will backs up a step. Then another. He stays low, his hands in front of him. Not a threat. A friend.

The dog lunges forward, limping slightly, and snatches the cookie off the ground before settling back down a few feet away watching Will closely.

"Good boy, good dog, just want to help you okay? I have more food,"

He tosses another treat towards the dog who crawls a little closer to grab it.

The following hour continues in much the same way, Will inching towards the pup and the dog slowly letting him approach. A few hours before the sun begins to set the dog has let Will come close enough that Will can clean out the dog's injuries, wrap its leg and bandage its flank. When he goes to walk again the dog follows.

"Do you have a name?' asks Will

Predictably there is no response.

"Well I'm not going to just keep calling you dog. How about Kevin?"

The dog glares incredulously.

“No, you’re right Kevin isn’t a great name …” Will glances around, “Fern?”

Will shakes his head and dismisses the idea. The dog doesn’t strike him as the type to be named Fern. It’s uncreative anyway.

“Winston?”

Will isn’t sure where the name comes from, but it feels right and the dog, now named Winston, glances up at the name. It may be pure coincidence, but Will feels like it also could be fate. Either way it’s a good name.

They walk together and Will prattles on to Winston about everything that has gone on. The voice in his head is thankfully silent.

“My dad’s been drowning for a long time, tangled in the buoys of a dozen crab traps, thick ropes digging into his flesh as the weight pulls him down like an anchor to the bottom of the sea. He’s just barely been keeping his head above water. I hope that this isn’t the final weight that pulls him down. Who’d you leave behind Winston? Someone out there missing you?”

Winston doesn’t respond to any of Will’s queries, but he lends a sympathetic ear and sometimes nods his head or glances over with understanding in his large brown doggy eyes.

They settle down for dinner and Will tells Winston that tomorrow they’ll find a stream to follow so that if they run out of water they’ll still be able to keep going. Then the two of them settle down, snuggling close to each other. Will winces as Winston accidentally bumps his injured arm and thinks idly that he ought to change the bandage. He’ll do it tomorrow. He’ll change the bandage, he’ll find water, he’ll figure out what the heck he’s doing tomorrow.

He falls into a deep sleep.

Hours later the moon illuminates the trees. The forest is still. A bird caws somewhere in the distance. There’s a pause, the shadows seem to shift. A few droplets of water fall from brown leaves as a puff of air passes through the woods. Will shifts, pulling in his legs closer, hugging his knees to his chest as he shivers in his sleep.

Another rustling, this time closer. Winston unfurls from where he lays around his boy and growls quietly at the shifting underbrush. The rustling pauses. The woods are still. Winston lays his head back down and eyes the darkness between the trees warily.

Whatever is there, it stands just outside of sight and does not move. As the moon travels through the sky, it simply stands there, watching. Not a dog, not even a shapeshifting one, something other watches on with its eyes red like pomegranate seeds glowing in the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote the story super out of order, so I started with chapter one then wrote chapter 9 and then came back and wrote the second half of this chapter before filling in everything in the middle.

Also shout-out to The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon by Stephen King which is what I base all my creepy woods writing off of.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Will is out of water and surrounded by danger. He's going to survive whatever it takes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will is running out of water and he hasn't found a stream yet. His throat feels dry and his tongue heavy. When grabs the water bottle from his backpack he looks into it, he sees less than a cup left in the bottom.

'You managed to escape Hobbs, but the thirst will catch up with you,' the voice reminds him, 'three days without water and you're dead. Should've let the birdman kill you and been done with it,'

He tries to talk over the voice, to drown it out with his own, "Have I ever told you about the time I hitchhiked home?" he asks Winston.

Winston is predictably silent, but Will knows that he hasn't yet.

"It was late and my dad had driven me out because he had to go fix a boat motor and the man said he'd pay extra if he didn't have to bring it in, so me and my pa pilled in the car and headed out on the highway,"

'Will you drink Winston's blood? If it gets bad enough will you rip into his flesh and suck the blood from your dog's veins? Make him trust you now, but you'd turn on him if it gets to that point. Unless he turns on you first. How long can dog's go without water?'

Will stumbles over a root and almost crashes head first into the dirt. He feels weak with thirst. Feverish. His head throbs and his vision blurs. He stands back up anyway. He needs to keep going.

"We stopped at a gas station bathroom a few hours out because my pa had to go. He left me in the car, but a few minutes after he entered the store I realised that I had to go too, so I hopped out,"

'Might as well accept your death now,'

Will doesn't accept anything. He's going to make it. He fought, he survived, he will continue to survive until his final breath escapes him and he collapses on the ground. He drinks the last sip of his water.

“And well, my pa didn’t realise that I’d left so he drove off thinking I was still in the backseat. He was on the phone with the customer, so that might’ve been it, but I stepped out of the bathroom and he was just gone. I had no idea what to do. No phone, no nothing. I went into the shop and asked if I could call him on their landline,”

Will pauses in his story. His throat is dry and talking isn’t helping. Even if it keeps the voice quieter, it’s not worth it. He falls silent.

His dad had realised that Will was gone an hour down the road, but didn’t turn around. He had a customer to get to and wouldn’t make it in time to do the job if he went to pick up Will. They needed the money. Will had been fifteen. He caught a ride with a family headed back to his area and walked the extra hour after they dropped him off near town.

He and his dad hadn’t fought about it, but Will certainly had been a bit more chilly with him afterwards. In fact even after his dad had explained himself, Will hadn’t said a word to his dad for the next few days.

‘You’ll never say anything else to him now. Never see him again. What was the last thing you said to him anyway? Do you even remember?’

Will doesn’t, but imagines that it was likely something simple. ‘There’s dinner in the fridge’ or ‘My day was okay’, the little things that he’d said over and over. It’s not the words that Will is going to miss anyway.

His dad and him never really talked much. Instead he thinks of the fact that they’ll never go fishing together again and never sing along to the same radio songs. They won’t sit side by side anymore, just barely touching, just acknowledging ‘I’m here and so are you’ because his dad’s not here. Will is all alone. He wants to cry. He wants to drink some goddamn water. He wants to go home.

He keeps going. One step in front of the other. Winston at his side and the trees above his head shading his path.

He’s so out of it he doesn’t notice the scavengers until the first one pounces on him. Its claws dig into his skin and the tears he’d kept sealed behind his eyes spill out.

“GET THE FUCK OFF ME!” he screams out into the woods as he struggles to push the little beast away. He finally tears it off his chest with his left hand and throws it with all his strength onto the ground. He grabs his knife.

A group of them surround him. Their skin is too pale, their fingers are too thin, their ears pointed and the legs curve not into toes, but talons. Their mouths are drawn into bloodthirsty grins. Their teeth are visible, two rows of them, sharp, sharklike and speckled with blood. They are smaller than a human, too, only a few feet tall.

‘Goblin’ his brain screams out at him and Will has to agree. They look like the little motherfucking bankers from Gringotts but paler like they’ve been doing some Snow White skin care regime that turned them feral. Will imagines that skin regimes intense enough to turn skin milky white are likely to have unexpected side effects like that.

“Set down the knife, kid,” rasps out one of the scavengers in a voice that is surprisingly reminiscent of a bad gangster accent that he’d heard once in a middle school play, “You can’t fight us all,”

‘The little goblin man has a point,’ chimes in the voice, ‘you might be able to stab one, but the other three will tear you apart while you’re doing it,’

Will’s hand trembles. He whirls around in an attempt to keep his eyes on all the scavengers. His vision is blurry with his own tears, but he forces a grin on his face, “I doubt that I’m particularly tasty.”

The scavengers mumble in disagreement and Will realises that this particular thread of conversation is pointless. These goblins had eaten Hobb’s old corpse. They’d likely eaten roadkill on the streets. Fresh meat like him would be a delicacy.

He stumbles as he turns and he imagines that this is it. They will now descend upon him and tear his flesh from his bones. He will live on only as energy in their bodies and food in their stomachs.

Thundering hoofbeats, an angry huff and a cracking of branches is the only clue that any of them get before another beast emerges from the shadows. Tall, dark and imposing, the creature stands in the forest and eyes both Will and the scavengers. Its chest is covered with dark black feathers that shift in the dappled sunlight. It’s antlers stretch towards the sunlight and its red eyes meet his.

Will takes a step back. It’s not a decision he considers, not one that even crosses his mind, but the instinctual response to being faced with such a predator. Step back, run, escape, leave this place. He freezes instead, his step seeming impossibly huge and impossibly loud in the clearing.

For a second nobody moves.

Then the ravenstag lunges forward. It’s antlers impale one of the scavengers and then ravenstag tosses its head in order to throw the body down. The scavenger hits the ground with a thud and blood leaks from the holes left by the antlers. It groans, but is unable to rise to its feet. The ravenstag steps forward and smashes the creature’s brain in with one of its hooves.

The head squishes like an apple in a cider press, shards of bone and blood and brain leaking into the dirt and grass beneath it. The body is now the second corpse that Will has seen in the past couple days.

‘It’d have killed you if the ravenstag hadn’t killed it,’ the voice reminds him and he has to agree. He thanks the ravenstag profusely and it bends its head down towards him. He steps forward carefully and places a hand on its forehead.

“Thank you,” he repeats although his voice cracks with thirst. He swallows dryly in an attempt to wet his mouth. His spit is glue sealing his lips together.

When he stands to go, the ravenstag only eyes him before indicating that he ought to follow it. He does and they travel through the woods until the rush of running water meets Will's ears. He staggers forward, increasing his speed into a run. Winston is at his heels as the two plunge into the icy stream.

He stumbles into the river and his hands dig into the water. Water, clean and clear runs over his knuckles and he stares at it in awe. Water, water, life giving and beautiful water. He ducks his chin in and opens his mouth, he cups it in his hands and drinks from it. It's cool and refreshing and he probably should be boiling it, but it tastes too goddamn delicious for him to care at the moment. He just wants to drink it all down. He will not die today. He will survive. He supposes that he owes the ravenstag twice over for this, but when he turns back to thank it once more, it's gone.

Chapter End Notes

I have the whole story done now!! I just need to publish it. This was the very last chapter that I had to write which is super weird cause I've never really written a story out of order before, but yeah I wrote chapter 10 before this one.

I'm still not even sure if I like this chapter much, but it's kinda important because, uh, Will meets Hannibal! So that's exciting.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> Will finds a body! Because duh this is a Hannibal Fanfic and I felt the need to include an artful murder.

After that Will starts to see traces of the ravenstag more often. Sometimes he just catches a glimpse of it through the trees, other times it's a few feathers that he finds lying near him when he wakes up. It doesn't approach him again, but he knows that it's there.

For a couple days that is all there is to it. He finds a stream, he drinks all that he can. He cleans out his wound with alcohol and changes the bandage. The skin begins to scab over and heal. Then the ravenstag comes closer. It visits him while he's eating dinner and Winston begins to acknowledge it with a wag of his tail as opposed to a growl.

"I'm getting used to this," he confesses to the ravenstag one morning while he's eating breakfast, "hunting, living, drinking from the stream. It's certainly easier than high school."

The ravenstag tilts its head attentively.

"No people out here bother me about being a little crazy," he continues with a self deprecating smile.

The ravenstag takes a step closer and folds its legs under it so it's sitting pressed up against Will. Will reaches out a hand and begins to pet its antlers and its ears absentmindedly.

"I killed someone you know or, well, something before I met Winston and you."

The ravenstag gives him a look that looks surprisingly human, it tilts its head as if to say 'why' or maybe 'how'd that make you feel'

"I felt powerful, vicious, alive. He was trying to kill me and I sliced his throat. Maybe in another world if things were a bit different I'd have gutted him. Cut him open like the fish I used to catch with my dad. He saw the bait, but not the hook hidden within. Maybe that makes me a bad person, but does it really matter out here who's good or bad. Just who survives."

The ravenstag huffs out agreement and Will continues to lean on the monster.

"You killed one of the scavengers. Why?"

'For you' he can imagine the ravenstag saying incredulously, 'who else?'

“I suppose it’s natural. Death and life. It’s a cycle that can’t be broken. The prey will always be eaten and the bodies of the predators will return to the ground to rot. Eaten away too until all that’s left is soil for the plants and food for the bugs. Nobody can escape death. Maybe that shouldn’t be a comfort, but I’d rather my body feed the earth than drift to heaven. Not sure I’d go to heaven anyway. All that’d wait for me would be the fires of hell,”

The ravenstag leans in to give him comfort and he sits beside it in silence as he finishes his breakfast. Then he stands and gets to work on his tasks for the day. The ravenstag disappears into the woods. Will goes through his daily tasks: check the traps, set them, make a fire, boil water, then fish in the river. He walks to where his first trap is located and sees it undisturbed. He sighs and continues on to the next one.

It’s almost midday and he’s headed back to his home camp when he comes upon the body. He gestures to Winston to stay behind him as he approaches.

The corpse has been laid out with insurmountable care. A candle burns in it’s chest, the heart carved out and missing. Blackberry brambles pierce through the skin of the victim wrapping around its wrists, its ankles and its throat. A bloody collar. Its eyes have been replaced by blue gemstones.

Will knows that whoever it is that lays dead in front of him they are not nor ever were human. It’s too pale, it’s teeth too sharp, it’s body too small. Not just that, but he recognizes it. This was one of the scavengers. One of the fey driven off by the ravenstag. One of the fey who threatened his life.

His first reaction is not disgust, or fear, but awe. The figure, the creature, displayed in such a way is a beautiful thing. The dark thorns cut a contrast to the paper white skin, the blue gemstones that sit in its eye sockets are piercing and polished so finely he can nearly see his reflection.

He takes a deep breath, kneels by the body and lets the pendulum swing.

The fairy is alive as the brambles pierce through its flesh. This is by design. He rips the heart from the chest of the creature and it dies, choking on it’s own blood. He takes the lungs too. Empties out the rib cage.

These organs will be repurposed. A gift. To the one who has taken his heart. Whose heart he will claim soon. Inside the chest cavity he places a candle. It’s light flickers, strong and bright, the only light around for miles like a beacon in the clearing.

Lovely and luminescent.

Just like the blue gemstones he places in the eye sockets.

He tidies up, gently positioning the body, arms and legs spread, open and accepting. Then he backs off, into the woods. The candle burns on as he watches, hearing the rustling of leaves as…

Will starts as the realisation hits him. Pulling him forcefully from the vision. The killer is still there. The candle still standing tall, lit only recently. The killer has been watching him take in the corpse that was left. A gift. To him? He wonders briefly if this is a trap, but then remembers the obsessive care, the love put into this. A gift, then, not a trap.

He feels shivers down his spine as he glances around nervously. Winston seems to catch onto his unease and growls low in the back of his throat. Will pulls out his knife and readies it. Crouching low and watching for some movement.

Nothing.

The forest is unnaturally still. No leaves rustle in the wind, no birds hoot, nothing rustles in the underbrush. He takes a step back, slowly, knife still at the ready.

Behind him, a susurration, a humm of life, or maybe just his ears tricking him, maybe just the wind blowing it's way through the trees.

He turns wildly, brandishing his knife at whatever threat has left him a corpse. He is greeted only by shadowy trees, the space between them empty.

To his left a branch snaps.

In the luminescent glow of the candle the forest seems alive. The trees jeer at him, wicked shadow grins widening, black eyes watching his terror. The wind howls and in it he hears the croon of a monster and mocking laughter.

Will turns in a clumsy circle, trying to look everywhere at once. Winston sticks close to his side, a low growl in his throat.

'Nobody will hear your screams,' the voice taunts, 'nobody except Winston, but the monster will tear him apart too. Will you even scream? Maybe you'll laugh. Staring straight into the face of death and you'll giggle because you've finally snapped. Gone insane. Off the deep end. Is any of this even real?'

He clutches his knife harder and shakes his head as though to rid himself of the voices that stick to it. 'This is real,' he assures himself, but doesn't find it comforting.

Something is moving towards him. He can hear the rustling as it moves. It stalks forwards and the shadow seem to suck in around the being cocooning it in darkness. Just out of sight.

He listens to the faint huff of breath. He bends his knees. His fingers shake and the knife nearly slips from his palm. He grasps it tighter, his knuckles white around the handle.

He takes a deep breath. He considers briefly running. Just turning and sprinting far far away.

'It'd get you' the voice reminds him 'only prey runs. It's faster than you. Like a mountain lion it will rip your head off. Or maybe something more elegant. Maybe your murder will be a piece of art just like this last one.'

Would this beast truly kill him? The murder was a gift after all, but what was the point of such a gift? What would this killer desire from him?

He imagines the killer like Garret Jacob Hobbs. With cunning eyes and a knife in his hands. Another killer just waiting to plunge a blade deep into his stomach. To rip him open and tear out his organs.

The killer takes one more step toward him. He hears a twig snap beneath one of its feet. The crack echoes through the woods and Will's heart skips a beat.

They both pause. Staring. Waiting for the other to make the first move. Will's eyes begin to water and he's forced to blink. He swallows heavily, his saliva thick in his throat.

Will imagines his hands covered in dark red once more and his teeth drawn back into another sharp grin. Blood sticky on his fingers, slippery on the floor, running in river down the tile. This time blood will seep into the earth. The roots of the trees will suck up his blood and it will run through their trunks like sap.

He remembers how the blood welled up as he tried to keep it in. Patch it up, patch it up before it all leeks out. He was injured still. Not a fair fight.

'It wouldn't be a fair fight anyway. Human bones, human blood, useless little human fingers. A pig to the slaughter who doesn't know the butcher has it beat. Watch it run, what fun. Poor thing thinks it has a chance."

One good cut is all it would take to be over. Blood would run down, warm, thick and salty.

He remembers again, blood seeping, drip, drip, drip, footsteps down the hall, a kitchen floor stained red. A dead corpse on the porch, a night huddled in the bathroom. Scared, too scared to look outside. Turn away, close your eyes, the night is dark and full of terror. Lock the door, stay inside. He should've never opened that gate.

He can't run, he can't hide. Will Graham stands his ground instead. Sweat drips down his back, his eyes dart nervously around the clearing, but he readies himself to claw his way through whatever emerges.

Garret Jacob Hobbs is beside him once more, face white as a sheet, a bloody gash on his neck, 'see' he says as he points into the trees and Will's gaze follows his finger.

Before him the shadows curl back and finally the beast emerges from the shadows.

Will lets out a shaky breath that he had not realised he'd been holding in.

"It's you," he says with a small smile. The beast has long antlers which are bent deferentially. The feathers that adorn its neck and sprout from its legs are polished, glowing in the candle light with a iridescence, so inky black that colours, purples and reds, seem to scatter over them like an oil spill touched by sunlight. The ravenstag.

The beast inclines its head towards the body in a way that Will is unsure if it's purposeful or not, but he explains anyway. "A gift. From something," he looks it dead in the eye and cocks

his own head consideringly, “from you?”

The creature looks pleased. He’s unsure how he gathers this, perhaps a glint in its eye or an inclination of its head, but he can almost hear it saying to him, ‘I knew you’d figure it out, such a smart boy.’

He blushes at the imagined praise and ducks his head, letting his curls fall into his face. The ravenstag takes a step closer and Will collapses with a dull thud. His legs giving out from under him. The wave of adrenaline keeping him upright finally fades away and leaves only jittery hands and weak knees in its place.

Winston nudges at his side, a warm and comforting presence and he latches on, hands grabbing at Winston’s fur as his breaths stutter out unevenly.

The ravenstag watches for a minute before advancing towards Will. He glances up at it before burying his face once more in Winston’s flank.

“My apologies. I did not mean to frighten you,” comes a deep raspy voice beside him and a warm human hand runs through his curls, petting him as he pets his dog. As he had pet the ravenstag just this morning.

Will’s breath catches and he stills, tensing up at the unexpectedness. Another human? His hand finds its way back down to the knife he’d let fall, before turning to face the voice.

The body that the voice belongs to is crouched beside him. A man, hair slicked back and parted neatly, thin lips drawn together in an earnest smile, a suit that seems far too immaculate for the woods. His eyes are likely maroon, some darker shade of brown, but in the flickering luminesce appear like pinpoints of red, freshly spilled blood from an artery.

This is Will’s ravenstag, he knows with such certainty that it surprises him, but he swears that he can see shadowy antlers lingering on its brow or perhaps a dark feather clinging to its shirt collar.

“Hannibal,” the ravenstag introduces itself, extending a hand towards Will, “I’m glad to finally talk to you.”

“Will,” Will takes the hand and shakes it, “the pleasure is mine.”

Hannibal grins widely and his hand lingers, clinging to Will’s a second longer than is normal for a handshake before withdrawing.

“Follow me Will. I imagine that you are hungry,”

Will thinks about refusing, but he remembers the body he’d just run from. The body that the man in front of him killed. He also remembers the ravenstag. The one who had saved him, who sat beside him, whom he talked to and who lived beside him. The ravenstag that he’d trusted, and that maybe, he meets Hannibal’s eyes, maybe that he still trusts.

Hannibal places a hand on Will’s shoulder, firm and possessive. His fingernails dig in slightly. Will feels his legs shake, ready to collapse.

In some deep part of his brain the voice pipes up again, ‘he’ll catch you if you fall.’

Will isn’t sure if it’s a comforting notion or not, but he takes a shuddery step forward and then another. This is his ravenstag. If the beast wanted him dead, he’d have been impaled ages ago or left for the scavengers to tear apart.

“Thank you Will for trusting me, I will not let you down,” Hannibal says as though he’d read Will’s mind.

“I hope not,” Will responds and his hand falls to his knife. If Hannibal betrays his trust he will not hesitate to dig the blade into the chest of the beast even if it kills him too.

Hannibal smiles down at him despite the clear threat, and as they walk side by side, the hand resting on his shoulder slides down to his lower back. Will smiles back and leans into Hannibal’s arm. A gentleman escorting his lady to a ball, a charade of lovers, a promise of what’s to come. Will hopes Hannibal will keep true to his word.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Hannibal's POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before Hannibal leaves the dead body he spends his time watching his human. He spends the week between his courting gift and Will's kill of the shrike, worrying. It infects everything that he does. While he's talking to his patients he's worried, while he's eating dinner he's thinking about Will sitting there skinning a small fish for a meagre supper and shaking the last drop of his water onto his tongue.

The stab wound on his shoulder seems to pain Will as he hikes through the forest, infection gathers at the edges of it and Hannibal can't imagine that the added pressure of the backpack strap which rubs at the wound when he walks helps to alleviate the pain.

He notices his boy pop opioids into his mouth like candy. He swallows them dry, not enough water to do otherwise. Although fey tend to be hardier than humans and live much longer, they still find themselves injured like any living thing does and Hannibal has spent years patching up injuries for the residents of the forest. He knows that Will is not okay even if his boy seems to be soldiering on without mind to his own well being.

The dog is a rather unfortunate addition although Will seems to hold the beast in high regard. The first night Hannibal visits, the pup whom Hannibal overheard Will calling Winston, senses his presence and keeps him from approaching without risking waking his boy.

The second day that Hannibal goes to visit, he comes to find Will surrounded by a group of hungry scavengers. The boy is glowing once more, shadows coiling around his feet, his lips drawn back in a snarl and his knife extended.

One scavenger on its own might not be too much of a challenge for his boy, but all four? Armed as they are with their wide and hungry mouths and sharp claws made for ripping skin? His boy wouldn't have had much of a chance to escape with his life even if his loyal Winston fought alongside him.

Luckily Will has Hannibal. His own guardian angel or guardian demon since nothing about Hannibal is holy. This is the type of situation that Hannibal has been waiting for. He rushes in, horns lowered and impales the fist of the scavengers on his antlers.

The movement surprises everyone and they all turn shocked to face Hannibal who shakes his head once, twice, and lets the body fly off his antlers and into a tree. He stands tall and lets

out a huff before stepping forward to squish the unworthy creature like an ant under his shoe.

The scavengers have likely heard stories even if they've never seen Hannibal himself and at the sight of the ravenstag they disperse into the woods leaving Will standing, his knife still clutched in his hand and breathing heavily.

The shadows that pool around his feet disperse back into the trees, but Will doesn't drop the knife. He looks up to meet Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal feels stricken. Punched in the gut. Will's eyes seem to peel back the layers of feathers, fur and skin that stand between them and look deep into where Hannibal's blood pumps in his arteries, where his heart beats in his chest and his lungs draw in air. He feels flayed alive by Will's gaze. It only lasts a second though before Will drops his eyes once more.

"Thank you," says Will and his voice only wavers a tiny bit as he inclines his head towards Hannibal, "I owe you I suppose. I would probably be dead without you to save me."

Hannibal can feel the magic of those words. The weight of that statement. A debt to be paid. Yes, his patience certainly paid off. He wonders if Will can feel it too. The promise is like a chain binding them together. Soon. Soon his boy will truly be his.

He lowers his head to Will, his antlers touch the ground lightly and he stands there, bowing his head to his boy for a full minute before he hears Will tuck the knife back into his pack and take a step closer.

He nearly groans when Will places his hand upon Hannibal's head and rubs it. The ravenstag lets himself lean into the touch. He loves the warm skin on his fur and listens to the hot puff of Will's breaths as the adrenaline wears off. He tunes into Will's heartbeat, surprised that it's steady. Unafraid. How magnificent.

"Thank you," Will says again, but his voice is raspy and his legs still shake. Will smiles as he leans in a little closer and presses a kiss to the top of Hannibal's head between his antlers. Love wells up in the ravenstags chest and for a second he finds it hard to breathe. Then Will is pulling away and Hannibal raises his head to watch him leave.

The boy needs water. Hannibal is happy to provide. He trots over and nudges the boy with his nose in order to get his attention and then walks off towards where he knows a stream is. His boy follows him as they trek through the underbrush. Once his boy can hear the water, he is off, running towards it. Hannibal watches on with a smile as Will drinks his fill. His boy will not die today. His boy will not die for a long time so long as he has a say in it.

After the incident with the scavengers, Hannibal continues to visit Will every night. His boy looks almost angelic when he's asleep. Fallen from grace and right into Hannibal's waiting arms. While he rests in Morphesus' domain his features slacken and his lips curve up into a small smile. The weight of time has been lifted off him.

He is reminded of the humming chorus from Madame Butterfly. The dark stage, figures illuminated by a slight blue light as the air swells and falls with a gentle breeze of music. A

wind blows at Will's hair and the boy lets out a sigh, one of his hands flinging out uncoordinatedly towards Hannibal. The fey feels touched and his heart is warmed by the small gesture. His boy is reaching towards him even in sleep.

But Will does not always rest peacefully. Sometimes he tosses and turns, sweat dripping off him, caught in the throes of some nightmare. Hannibal can't ease his sleep or erase his pain as much as he might wish he could.

Hannibal does what he can though. Sometimes he'll sing gentle lullabies in Lithuanian. Once Winston even let him approach and he laid a hand on Will's brow, pulled him into his arms and shushed Will gently as Will whimpered with fear. He let his fingers brush through Will's hair and relished the feeling of his boy's warm body against his own. At the end of the first week he's even reached the point where the dog lets him change his boy's bandage and tend to the wound.

He begins to visit Will during the day as well. Will talks and Hannibal listens. Will smiles and Hannibal feels his heart fill with warmth.

He wants Will. He wants all of Will. He sets the second stage of his plan into motion a little less than a week later.

A gift. A courting gift for his lovely boy. It will need to be suitably impressive. A show of his own strength and prowess, but also something elegant and beautiful. A tableau. He hasn't made one in the woods for some time although he makes them quite often in the human world. He likes to watch the authorities scramble for clues they will never find. Tempting fate perhaps, but what is life without a little risk?

He locates one of the scavengers who ran from him. A scavenger who attacked his Will who tried to hurt what was his, what was under his protection. If Hannibal had come a little later Will could've been dead.

In addition to this the scavenger is unpleasantly rude which is a killable offence even in itself. When Hannibal shows up at the home of the scavenger, a small hovel against a tree, the little beast spits at his feet.

"Go away you abomination," shouts the scavenger.

"That's rude," is Hannibal's only comment as he delicately steps around the spittle and approaches the shack in which the scavenger and his friend have holed up, "You know what else was rude?"

"I don't care! Just leave me be. I won't touch your precious human again, okay?"

"It's a little late for that. Should've considered it before you attacked,"

"I didn't know! I didn't know! It's not my fault. If you were hunting the kid you should've spoken up about it."

"You're right of course, my mistake,"

At his words the scavenger relaxes and Hannibal takes the final step so they're standing an arm's length from each other. Hannibal sighs. They never learn. Like a viper he strikes. His hand lunges out and before the scavenger is fully aware of his predicament, Hannibal is choking him.

Hannibal presses on the scavenger's windpipe just until he passes out, but not so far as to kill him. He plans to make this scavenger's death much more spectacular than a simple strangulation. He drags the body towards the spot he has chosen to set up his art piece. Soon Will will find his gift and Hannibal hopes that he accepts it. He cannot wait.

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter is short and kind of filler, but not to worry the next chapter is when things really start to go down.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal have a difficult, but necessary, conversation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They arrive at Hannibal's abode. A large mansion of a place, the stones overrun by ivy and the interior decor leaning heavily on skulls and threatening auntiques. It's exactly what Will might have expected.

"I think the first order of business is to get you clean. I'll draw you a bath," Hannibal says as he leads Will up the stairs. Winston waits on the porch.

"Thank you," Will accepts the bath without too much fuss since he knows that a few weeks just bathing in the creek haven't been good on him. He worries about the dirt he's leaving on Hannibal's lush rugs and polished wood floors.

"Leave your clothes in the hamper outside the door. I will be waiting," Hannibal tells him as he turns the faucet on to fill the tub.

Will nods, still feeling a bit dazed as Hannibal leaves him to undress. He shrugs out of the grimy outfit he'd been wearing since he arrived in the woods and peeks out to drop the clothes in the hamper that waits exactly where Hannibal said it'd be.

He spots Hannibal sitting at a desk in the adjourning room and Hannibal meets his eye for a second before Will slams the door shut quickly. Will is blushing furiously and wants to blame it on the heat of the bathroom, but can't.

He shakes his head as though to remove thoughts of that nature from his brain before he sinks into the steamy pool with only a slight wince as his shoulder screams in protest.

The bath salts fill the air with the smell of eucalyptus and he can feel his muscles relax as he leans back into the warm embrace of the water. He breathes in deeply letting the steam fill his lungs and clean them out. The heat sinks into his every pore, the water caresses his body. Cleaning him. Purifying him.

He grabs a washcloth and begins to scrub himself down. The dirt and grime of the last week and a half sloughs off and the water begins to darken in protest. He works himself over until his skin is pink and raw. He feels clean for the first time in a while.

He wraps the fuzzy towel that has been left in the bathroom around him and unlatches the door to peek out to where Hannibal sits waiting for him.

“I’m done bathing,” he calls out.

Hannibal rises from his chair, walks over and leans in to the point where Will can feel the exhales of Hannibal’s breath on his forehead. Hannibal breathes in deeply and then steps back and nods approvingly, “you certainly smell better.”

“Are you saying that I stunk before?”

“I would never be so rude. I was merely stating that the bath seems to have benefited you greatly. Do you not agree?”

“Of course I do. Feels awesome to be clean again.”

“You look very nice,” Hannibal smiles and Will feels like a rabbit being stared down by a hungry wolf. Will is suddenly very aware of the fact that the only thing that separates the two of them is his towel. He holds very still and watches Hannibal unsure if the racing of his heart is excitement or fear. Perhaps a bit of both. Instead Hannibal just presents him with a stack of clothes.

“Clean clothes,” Hannibal explains, “I’d hate for you to have to wear your dirty ones when you just got clean. They’re in the wash, although to be honest they might not make it. They were quite worn. These clothes might be big since they’re mine, but at least they’re clean. I’ll get you something a little more fitted to your size once I can.”

“Don’t worry about doing all that,” Will responds as he eyed Hannibal’s clothes nervously. Hannibal’s suit does look good and it certainly looks way beyond the price range of anything Will has ever worn. It’s form fitted and shows off his bulk. The tie is a blue paisley, but Hannibal pulls it off.

Hannibal sees him looking, “Not a fan of the tie? I wondered if I might be a little much, but I figured that it would work well with my dark colored suit. A little bit of a pop. If you don’t like the patterns, we can always get you something a little different.”

“I have nothing against the tie. It makes a very bold statement,” Will assures Hannibal.

“That’s nearly as bad as saying it looks ‘interesting’.”

“I think it’s at least a little better. It acknowledges something positive about the tie instead of just being so vague it’s insulting. Interesting is like ‘I took one bite and it tasted a little like cashew, but also kind of like dog biscuit and I’m confused as to how those flavours even got into an oatmeal cookie,’ whereas a bold statement is like, ‘I might not wear it, but when you walk into a room everyone looks your way,’ which, okay, admittedly now that I say it outloud sounds just as bad.”

Hannibal chuckles, “I’m glad for your honesty.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Really. I like the tie.”

“You do not need to lie to me Will. Put on the clothes and then we can talk more. I promise there are no statement pieces in there. Very basic, boring clothes.”

“I’m glad. I don’t need to give people another reason to stare.”

“I’m sure people only stare because they are admiring you.”

“And I assure you that it’s because they’re all thinking I’m insane.”

“Insanity is such a loose concept. Your brain is unique, true, but who decides what counts as normal in this world? Everyone’s brains work slightly differently. A taxi driver in New York has a larger posterior hippocampus than a bus driver, a man gets shot in the frontal lobe and has a personality change, a child can have nearly a quarter of her brain removed and years later function similarly to an adult with both of their brain hemispheres intact. I assure you that you are no more insane than I am.”

“You can turn into a ravenstag and make corpse art. You’re hardly a good measure of sanity.”

“Then I suppose if all else fails, we can be insane together.”

Hannibal meets Will’s eyes and the two smile at each other for a few seconds before Will awkwardly clears his throat, “I really… I’m going to change now,” he says as he turns and re enters the bathroom, shutting the door firmly behind him.

The clothes are indeed basic and boring as Hannibal promised. A soft white short sleeve, a pair of grey slacks and a pullover in a dark currant red. Will might’ve preferred his old flannels and jeans, but the fabrics are all soft and the clothes hang loosely. The sweater sleeves go over his hands and he has to add a belt and roll up the bottom cuffs of the pants.

He buries his nose in the collar of the sweater and breathes in deeply. It smells like soap and pine. He realises when he finally emerges from the bathroom that he’s smiling. And for the first time in a long time the grin that decorates his face is genuine.

“What do you do when you’re not… I mean when you’re human and all,” Will asks timidly while they sit around Hannibal’s kitchen table.

“I have a job. I work as a doctor here in the forest and see some patients as a psychiatrist outside of these woods.”

“You know the way out then?” Will asks with a childlike jubilation and the hope that had gradually faded since he’d seen the gate disappear behind him now is renewed like a flame rising from the ashes.

“Yes.” Hannibal’s answer is curt and he draws back from Will’s enthusiasm, his brow furrowing with some kind of emotion that Will doesn’t understand, but knows doesn’t match his own excitement.

“Could you take me?” he presses forward anway.

Hannibal does not answer for a while and Will fiddles with the cup of water sitting in front of him, glancing up hopefully every couple of seconds to look at Hannibal who remains frozen across the table from him. Just as Will is about to open his mouth to say something to break the silence, Hannibal speaks up. “What is it that you’re so eager to get back to?”

“I want to go home. I want to see my dad and live a normal life.”

“Normal?” Hannibal huffs at this and Will isn’t sure if he ought to defend himself and be offended when Hannibal continues, “You’ll never be normal, you’re extraordinary. You’re wasted out there with nobody who appreciates you fully. Your dad is sinking in a sea of despondency and he’d pull you down with him if you let him. I understand you love him, but does he even see you? You said it yourself Will that you could get used to this, to this forest, to this life.”

“I can’t just leave it all behind.”

“A caterpillar must seal itself away in a cocoon in order to emerge as a butterfly, so too do humans make transformations. Even if you went back you’d leave it all behind to get a job, to go to school, to become something new.”

“Am I a caterpillar, Hannibal?” Will asks. He lets a touch of humour colour his voice hoping that it’ll brighten the conversation again. Both he and Hannibal know that Will is not a hungry hungry caterpillar crawling around in search of apples and pears to eat.

“You’re a mongoose that hides under the house when the snakes come. I hope you find your fangs and tear this world apart. Howl at the moon if you wish Will and I will try my hardest to bring down the stars to light our home.”

Will thinks over Hannibal’s words. Leave it all behind? Could he really?

“It’s not my life, Hannibal. None of this is. I belong back in the real world where cars run on highways and people eat McDonalds, not here in the woods with fairies and magic.”

“You could. You could belong here if you wanted to. You could stay at my side, the two of us together.”

“Hannibal, we barely know each other. I’m a human and you’re clearly not. Why are you doing any of this? Why did you even save me in the first place? Why take me back here?”

“You’re mine,” Hannibal answers with a growl.

“Why?” repeats Will as he cranes his head back to look into Hannibal’s eyes. Searching for answers. Desperate for some reason he can cling to.

“I saved your life, didn't I? You owe me the years you have left in this world.”

“But why’d you do it?”

“You are fascinating, enchanting. Like the goddess of spring herself pulled down into the underworld to sit atop a throne of bones. So fragile, so human, but you refuse to break. It’s a

contradiction and one that I find intriguing. I want to learn everything there is to learn about you. Please give this a chance, give me a chance."

Will looks up at Hannibal whose face is the picture of earnestness. His eyes gleam and his lips are just barely parted with an exhalation of breath. His usually neat hair is slightly dishevelled. His face is open, honest and oh so beautiful.

"Hannibal," is all Will says and it comes out sounding like a threat and a promise and a prayer. Breathless and confused.

Hannibal steps closer, "let me take care of you Will. Let me dress you in the finest clothes and feed you the food I've prepared and give you the pleasure you deserve. You are mine," Hannibal growls out this last bit and maybe that's what snaps Will out of it.

This is a dangerous place. No matter how much Hannibal dresses it up, no matter how many delicious meals and comforting baths and clean clothes that he gives, this will always be a dangerous place. Hannibal is dangerous and Will just wants to go home.

"Would you even let me leave?"

Hannibal meets Will's eyes and sees something in them that makes him sigh and lean back again in his chair. "Of course I would. If it's what you truly want I'll show you the way out."

"Now?"

Hannibal sucks in a sharp pained breath, and grimaces out a smile. "After we finish lunch. I'll show you then. Let me at least feed you once before you go."

Will thinks it over, but nods decisively, "of course. I'd love a meal. Thank you Hannibal."

Hannibal meets his eyes briefly before turning away and retreating into the kitchen. Will feels cold in his absence and blinks back the tears that suddenly prickle in his eyes. He can't stay. Why doesn't Hannibal understand that?

True to his word, after lunch Hannibal leads him out the back door and through the cavity in a tree which splits like an arch and which they pass through like a doorway. Will finds himself standing before the old gate in his backyard once again.

"I suppose this is goodbye," Will says.

Hannibal nods, "for now. If you ever decide to come back, just knock twice and then open the fence and you'll step out of the tree we came into."

"Knock twice. Gotcha. I'll miss you."

Hannibal nods jerkily at that and then turns, knocks twice and steps back through the fence.

Will watches as the fence swings closed behind Hannibal and his ravenstag disappears back into the woods.

Then, finally, he turns to face home and walks towards the old house in the distance where he grew up and, until about a couple weeks ago, lived his whole life. Yet with the time he has spent away from it, he sees the flaws all the more clearly now.

The flowers have died away with time, bulbs rotting in the ground and bushes yellow and overgrown. It was always his mom who tended to the plants. Without her upkeep the place looks nearly abandoned. The only light is the flickering television screen, barely visible out the back window and the only noise coming scratchily over the speaker system that his dad rigged up a few years back.

If Will listens hard enough he can hear snippets of the audio, “the new Subaru… can take you anywhere… live the life you want to be living… save you fifteen precent or more on car insurance… back to the game… a great play… ”

He squints and thinks he sees his dad illuminated by the screen, haggard and ghostly. Less real than anything he’s seen in the forest. As if he will blink and his dad will crumble away to dust and disappear leaving an empty house and a TV still running for an audience that won’t ever return. Commercials and sports and movies looping and blending into each other until just static remains.

He moves a little closer, nervously now and careful to stay out of sight like a hunter approaching skittish prey. He doesn’t know what’s keeping him from bolting up to the front door and announcing his presence or maybe he doesn’t want to admit yet that he’s scared of going back.

Not that going back would be hard. No, the problem is that it’d be too easy. It’s only been a few weeks since he left through the gate. He’d be able to make up for the school work he missed and still be on track to graduate this spring. He’d spend the evening watching TV at his dad’s side and maybe go fishing on the weekends.

His time in the forest would fade away until, maybe, one day, years down the road he’d sit side by side with his wife and tell his kids a story about a ravenstag and a fearsome fey in a log cabin slain by an unlikely hero.

But that wouldn’t be right. He’s no hero. This is no children’s tale told before bed time. It’s real and ugly and it’s full of fairies who want his blood and a handsome count who eats people.

‘It’s not my life,’ he’d told Hannibal and it wasn’t. He was a human from a house in the middle of nowhere with a drunk for a dad, a 3.4 GPA, and a screwed up brain. He wanted to go into law enforcement and have a girlfriend and maybe work at a fast food restaurant as he struggled to pay his way through the police academy. Normal and boring and human.

So why is he hesitating? He takes another step towards home. And then another. Before he knows it he’s standing on his front porch peering in the front window. The entry space just beyond the door has a pair of muddy boots that look as though they’d been kicked to the ground. The rest of the shoes are neatly ordered on the low shelves, his old sneakers, his rain boots, and a pair of his dad’s flip flops.

To one side of the entry space is the kitchen which he leans forward to peer into. It's dark, no lights turned on, but the faint sunlight that filters past the clouds and through one of the windows illuminates the space enough for Will to make out a half eaten pizza in a box, a pile of dirty plates and other dishes and some empty cans of beer which decorate the kitchen table and cascade onto the counters. He feels like a stranger peering into a home that isn't his.

He finds the spare key hidden under the loose brick on the side of the porch and unlocks the door. He pushes it open quietly and winces as the door hinges creak.

'This is home' he tells himself, but he still feels like an intruder. A robber sneaking around that someone ought to call the cops on.

"Dad?" he calls out as he kicks off his shoes.

There's no response.

He rounds the corner into the living room. The TV is still gleaming with its artificial light, athletes run back and forth and an announcer talks on and on, but his dad is nowhere to be seen. A couple blankets and a stack of pillows make a vaguely humanoid shape, a trick of the light that looked like his dad when he was outside, but in actuality the house is empty.

It's no wonder. His dad is never home before it gets dark and the sun is still high in the sky. On a normal day he'd have just gotten out of school. He stands for a second in front of the bright lights, letting the colour and sound wash over him. He sighs before reaching forward to turn off the TV and the house falls suddenly silent. He stares at the dark screen and then turns and walks over to his bedroom.

He flicks on the light. His room stands just as he left it. His phone is thrown on his bed, blankets in a mound in the corner, and a pile of dirty laundry overflows over the edge of the laundry basket. It's a shrine to who he was before. Dust collects already on the edges of his desk and in the cracks of his keyboard. Untouched and preserved, a time capsule to his memory.

He turns the light off once more and backs out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. He stands for a second awkwardly in the hallway before turning to the kitchen. He fills a trash bag with empty beer bottles and cans, then starts on the dishes.

His hands are still sudsy he flicks on the stereo and a gentle crooning fills the kitchen. He sinks his hands back into the warm soapy water and starts to scrub the pots, pans and cups. Does he really want to stay here and spend his days alone in a dark home cleaning up his father's messes?

He pictures Winston sitting on Hannibal's porch waiting for a guy who's not coming back. Maybe he should go back just to get Winston, maybe he'd feel a little less lonely with a dog trailing behind him. His dad would never let him. The last stray he brought home his dad chased out with his shotgun complaining about allergies and dog hair.

He flicks the radio back off and silence overtakes the home once again. He sinks down to his knees and wraps his hands around himself. The silence feels crushing. Tears begin to slide

down his face and he starts to shake. He rocks back and forth on the kitchen tiles and digs his teeth into the flesh of his arm as he starts to hyperventilate.

It's not the empty house, not Winston or Hannibal or the bills and the dishes that pile up untended by his dad. It's not the blood that he sees dripping when he closes his eyes, not the corpses either the one gifted or the one created. It's not the class projects he spends working alone or the time his dad forgot him at the gas station. It's not any of it and, yet, it's all of it.

It's too much. His life feels too full and too empty. How could he leave his dad? How could he return to this?

He sits there, shaking and crying. Ugly sobs and choked out breaths emerge from between his lips as his teeth leave red half crescents in the flesh of his forearm.

He can't breathe. He can't stop. He rocks back and forth, back and forth, as he bites down harder.

The sink begins to overflow.

He stands up shakily to turn it off. His tears mix with the soap and the water. He braces himself against the counter and lets the sobs wrack through his body until finally his tears die down.

He rinses his face off in the sink and dries it with a paper towel. Then he finishes the dishes and stacks them on the drying rack. Every once in a while a tremor of a sob bubbles up.

He sits down on the couch beside the pillows and blankets he'd mistaken for his dad and stares at the dark TV screen. He glances up at the white ceiling and the plain white walls. A picture of his dad, his mom and him is framed on the bookshelf nearby. He sticks it in his backpack.

He glances towards the door, but he knows that he can't leave yet. That he wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he left like his mom did. Not a word, not a note, just drove off in their old car and never came back.

He goes into the kitchen and grabs a sticky note. 'I'm alive' he writes on it, 'alive and well. I hope you do okay without me. I love you. Your son, Will.'

He doesn't often say or write out 'I love you' to his dad. They're not words that are often thrown around in the Graham household, so he thinks long and hard before writing them, but decides, eventually, that this occasion merits them. Despite everything Will loves his dad.

He posts the sticky note on the fridge and then slides back on his shoes and laces them up. He wipes his face one last time as though he can rub away all traces of his tears and then he walks out the door and locks it behind him.

By the time Frank Graham's pickup truck pulls into the driveway Will is long gone.

Chapter End Notes

Will acts OOC a lot throughout this story. I know that. I write about Will having a tough relationship with his dad rather than like a spouse or something because it's easier for me to understand. I write Will as a teenager crying in the kitchen because I'm a teenager who has experience with anxiety attacks like that (or panic attacks or just emotional break downs? Idk I don't see a psychiatrist). It's easier for me to write about things that I have more experience with and this is my work of fiction, so yeah, that's all I wanted to say.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will?" Hannibal is shocked to see the face that stares back at him from his doorstep, a familiar dog at his side. He'd held onto hope, of course, that Will would return, but had doubted it would be so soon.

Will is shifting from foot to foot nervously and refuses to meet Hannibal's eyes. He reminds Hannibal acutely of a forlorn puppy and Hannibal can almost imagine a bushy tail tucked between his legs.

Will glances up and smiles nervously and fleetingly before returning his gaze to his feet. Hannibal notes the red eyes, the faint tear tracks and the shaking of his hands. It seems the real world did not agree with poor Will.

"Come in," Hannibal walks over and presses a firm hand to Will's back to guide him inside. Will follows along dutifully and collapses into one of Hannibal's armchairs. Winston settles down on the carpet by the large fireplace.

"I couldn't…" he trails off then starts again, "It just wasn't…" Will buries his head in his hands and sighs long and pained, "I can't imagine living that life again and being happy. Pretending that none of this ever happened and letting the memory of this place fade away into a little more than a fable."

"The best of tales have a core of truth in them."

Will glances back to Hannibal at this and shakes his head, he stands and begins to pace the room as he talks, hands trailing over Hannibal's decorations and the books in his shelves, "But that's all this would become eventually. Maybe even I would start to doubt myself. A flight of fancy, a folly of my own youth, a wild imagination, a few too many glasses to drink, excuses to make it all a play of my imagination, a necessary act to keep myself sane in a world who would accept the truth only as proof of my own insanity."

"And here you need not hide."

"Yes," Will smiles as he stops his pacing and stands perfectly still in the corner facing towards Hannibal's chair. Hannibal recognizes the grin as the sad and bitter thing it is, all twisted up and full of sharp edges instead of soft curves. "Here I don't need to hide."

"So you'll give me a chance then? Give this a chance?"

"Yeah," Will exhales a big breath with the word like he's pushing a great weight off of his back and sinks back down into his chair.

Hannibal smiles. The victory is a small one, Will is still frowning about it, still unsure, but he's leaning heavily and Hannibal is prepared to take the next step to pull him off the precipice on which he lingers. The first victory, but a necessary one. One he did not expect to come so soon.

"Your dad was not home when you arrived?" Hannibal asks even though he already is sure of the answer.

"He always works late. He's always working on something or other." Will defends his dad resolutely, "Plus we need the money."

Hannibal hums and Will glares at him.

"Oh please. Don't give me that. It's not as if I suffer from neglect. I do fine on my own."

"You're strong and independent, but even so we all need support from time to time. You do not get along well with your peers and your mother…?"

"Gone."

"Ah, forgive me. I did not realise. A lonely child in an empty home. My mother also died when I was far too young."

"Sorry," Will says, as he runs his fingers over each other, intertwining and rubbing his palms, his foot bounces up and down. He radiates nervous energy and Hannibal places a soothing hand on Will's knee. Will's foot stills and he winces, "sorry," he apologises again.

"There is nothing to apologise for. Sit next to me."

Will makes his way over to the couch and sits down next to Hannibal who begins to rub soothing circles into his palms and up his arms. The touch is grounding and Will relaxes into the cushions.

Hannibal begins to speak again, "My mom made the best beet borscht. She would call out over the fields, 'dinner' and Mischa and I would come scrambling up the hills. We'd be barefoot, dirty and out of breath and my mom would send us to wash up and remind us to wear shoes next time or she'd lock us outside and let us become the heathens that we so clearly were trying to be. 'Where are the lovely children I raised?' She'd ask, 'I was sure that I'd instilled manners into them.' She was always smiling though when she said it and she'd help scrub the dirt off our toes in the bathtub."

Will smiles at the memory as he imagines a young Hannibal wild and free. It seems so far away. "My mom didn't like shoes much," he shares timidly, "always was a bit of a hippy."

"A hippy?"

"Yeah. It's shocking I'm not named Rain or something like that, but my dad argued hard for Will since it was the name of his Grandfather, so Will was what I was named. She was the one who always told stories about the fey. Warned me not to go through the back gate."

Hannibal presses a soft kiss to Will's head and WIll finds that he doesn't mind much as he's pulled in closer, "I'm glad you came through anyway."

Will is silent for a minute after Hannibal's comment. Things would be so much simpler if he'd never stepped through that gate, but in the end he tells Hannibal, "I'm glad I met you."

They continue to talk, trading stories, theories and opinions until Hannibal rises to make dinner and then they feast on acorn squash soup and some fancy side salad. The next day Will wakes up to the noise of Hannibal in the kitchen. It's oddly domestic.

"I'll see you tonight?" Will asks.

Hannibal smiles at him and hands him a plate of breakfast scramble, "or you could come into the office with me. It's up to you. I could set you up to graduate still if that's what you want. Online classes with some great teachers who might encourage the kind of creative thinking that you do."

"Online classes?"

Hannibal shrugs, "I would recommend it, but it's up to you."

Will nods and gets another one of Hannibal's approving smiles.

"This evening, I want to" Hannibal pauses to consider his words carefully, "have a sort of ceremony."

"A ceremony? Some kind of religious thing? Are you even religious?"

"I'm pagan, yes, but not that kind of ceremony. It's a fey ceremony. It's traditional to have one when one is inviting someone else into their home to live with them and to… be with them."

"Be with them?" Will questions catching Hannibal's odd pause.

"To the other fey I will be broadcasting my claim to you. I will be taking you in as my mate." Hannibal held up a hand to silence any of Will's protests, "I want you. If you're not okay with that let me know, but either way I think that the safest bet to keep the other fey off of your back would be to claim you as a mate. That way any threat on you is a direct action against me and I can respond to it as such. This will come in hand most especially with the higher fey who unlike the scavengers it would cause some political strife for me to attack purely due to a threat on a human guest, but almost everyone would be in support of me defending my mate."

"Okay. That sounds smart."

"Tonight then. You don't need to worry, I'll help you to prepare."

Will wonders if he should be nervous, if he should be worrying. A ceremony? It seems so formal, so final, but he acquiesces anyway. He's gone this far.

Together he and Hannibal walk to Hannibal's office. Will spends the rest of the day tucked into the corner of Hannibal's waiting room watching patients of all kinds come in and go out. They all eye him with some level of confusion, some hungrily, some warily, but none pester him. He's glad for it and he's even more glad when Hannibal comes out to check in on him every couple of hours. They eat lunch together and then walk back to Hannibal's house side by side.

Will wonders how soon he'll begin to think of it not as Hannibal's house, but as home. He imagines it'll be sooner than he thinks especially with the way things are progressing.

A few hours later, Will sits at the head of the table, a crown of roses on his head and a heavy cape of feathers draped over his shoulders. Winston lays by his feet surprisingly calm in the face of so many monsters. Will supposes that it's from spending so much time with Hannibal.

"Eat, eat, eat, eat," chant the trees. The other fey eye him with shifting expressions. Their grins and frowns illuminated by the candle light.

Will swallows nervously, unable to meet Hannibal's eyes that glow with obsession. He turns to the food in front of him. Bloody red meat staining the white porcelain plate. It's nearly raw, but even so does not lack Hannibal's usual artistry. A meal that's almost too pretty to eat.

"Eat, eat, eat" the trees whisper to him, shadows swaying to a beat that he can not hear as they lean in closer, "eat, eat, eat."

He picks up his knife. Hannibal squeezes his shoulder approvingly. The unspoken praise warms something deep inside him and he decides not to examine it too closely.

He cuts a piece of the steak and raises it to his lips. He hesitates a second before he bites into it. Blood drips down his chin as he chews, once, twice, the meat tender in his mouth, fatty and smooth. It goes down easily when he swallows.

"So beautiful," murmures Hannibal into Will's ear and the ravenstag's hands wrap around Will's face, tilting it upwards. Hot breath teases Will's throat before Hannibal's rough tongue begins to lick, tasting the salt of his sweat, biting down gently on his skin.

"So glad you came back," Hannibal presses a final kiss to his neck before moving upwards so that he can lick off the blood that had dripped down Will's chin. He follows the trail up and into Will's mouth, pressing together their lips into a claiming, searing kiss that tastes like iron and fate.

Will's pulse is skittering along, skipping, jumping, running, speeding up as Hannibal leans down, turning Will so that they might press their bodies together easier. Fear and arousal mix together into a potent bouquet of hormones, adrenaline spiking as Hannibal lets out a growl.

Will imagines he already knew what he was getting into when he agreed to a mating ceremony, but some part of him had been in denial up until this moment. 'Maybe Hannibal isn't interested in that way,' he'd told himself a few hours earlier, 'don't go assuming.' But

now as Hannibal kisses him, he can't imagine anything different. It seems to him, in this moment where their lips are sealed together, that this was their destiny from the moment they met. Kismet, fate, inevitable.

"How does it taste?" asks Hannibal as his palms rub Will's shoulders in comforting circles of contact.

Will leans into the touch, his tongue flicks out to lick his lips and Hannibal's gaze is drawn to it like a moth to flame. "Exquisite. Your cooking always is," is his response to Hannibal's inquiry.

The ravenstag grins widely. The smug bastard. "Then let us feast, my queen. May these pomegranate seeds pull my own Persphone to my side. Might my harvest pull me down a queen to find a seat beside me in this underworld."

It's the kind of poetic bullshit that only Hannibal can say un-ironically. In any other case Will might be offended at being called a queen or the comparison to Persephone, but in this moment he feels flattered as he's sure that's what Hannibal intended.

Hannibal pulls out a chair and sits next to Will. He pulls Will's plate close to him and cuts off another chunk of meat lifting the forkful of food up to Will's mouth. Will bites down and moans around the fork as he pulls the flesh into his mouth, wrapping his tongue around the utensil and licking off the sauce that the meat was cooked in.

At this point the other fey have begun to eat as well, but Will and Hannibal ignore them. Before the party started Hannibal talked with each of them, dragging Will along and subjecting him to excruciatingly small talk. Now their time is over and the other fey are aware of this. This is a mating ceremony, not just another of Hannibal's dinners and there is a certain tradition to be followed. Their audience fades away into the background, eating quietly and quickly. The trees have fallen silent and the only noise is the murmur of quiet conversations from the guests and the clack of silverware. The eyes of the other fey dart occasionally over to the couple who sit at the head of the table, but nobody makes a move to include them in any conversations and Will and Hannibal remain in their own world.

Hannibal takes a bite of his own, his sharp teeth glint with red blood. He offers another bit to Will who takes it in. Everything that Hannibal gives him he swallows down, his stomach filling with the things that Hannibal has hunted down and slaughtered. A dark part of his delights in it. Eating the things that think him to be only prey when really they are the true pigs at the dinner table he shares with a monster.

"Beautiful," Hannibal croons to Will as the last bite disappears between red-stained lips.

Hannibal watches as Will swallows, his gaze pausing intently on Will's neck for a long moment before he leans in for another kiss. A chaste one, brief, but searching. Hannibal pauses and pulls back, his eyes meeting Will's and the two stare at one another until Hannibal breaks eye contact. Hannibal grins and Will matches it with a grin of his own. He feels drunk on the feeling of all of this. The whispering of the trees hypnotising him into some alternate reality.

The dinner continues, Hannibal kissing Will, Will's hands threading their way under Hannibal's shirt. By the time Hannibal's shirt comes off, the other fey are gone. There is a certain etiquette to a mating ceremony and Hannibal's guests are nothing if not polite. Perhaps had Franklyn been there, he might have tried to say goodbye to his host or engage in some benign dinner conversation, but he is not and so nobody bothers the new couple.

Once everyone is gone, Hannibal stacks the plates to the side, clearing away the table of silverware and empty platters and a few servants emerge to take away the dishes. Will watches him, frozen in place, confused as to how anything goes from here on out. He is drowning in all of this and unsure if Hannibal is the one keeping him afloat or pulling him under.

When everything is a little more tidy and the room is empty of anyone but them, Hannibal wipes his hand on a napkin. He cranes his neck to one side so he can view Will at an angle. Will barely sees him move. His muscles spring forward like a cat pouncing on its prey and in an instant Will is pushed, spread onto the table with Hannibal's hands pushing him down and Hannibal's mouth on his.

Will presses his hands to Hannibal's bare chest and feels the warmth radiating from beneath his skin. The blood pumping through his veins, his heartbeat going almost as fast as Will's.

Hannibal's grin is full of teeth, "I want you. Want to mark you, want to claim you. Want to make you mine."

With each comment he presses a kiss down. One on Wil's forehead, a few on his neck, down his collar bones. Will shrugs out his shirt and Hannibal descends down his chest. His words become whisperings in a language unrecognisable to Will.

"Bed?" Will asks through the haze and for a second he thinks Hannibal is going to deny him, but then big hands are wrapping around him, lifting him up. His legs shoot out for balance and he wraps them around Hannibal's waist.

Everything seems to catch up to Will at this moment and suddenly he feels like a clumsy koala. Is he clutching too tightly? Is he a bad kisser? What is next in all of this? Hannibal seems so confident and Will's been flying by this whole time by the seat of his pants.

The future is spinning around him uncertainty and all of a sudden he's not so sure about any of this. What is he really doing?

Hannibal notices that Will's frozen up and presses a gentle kiss to his forehead, "We can go slow. Trust me."

And he does. It's terrible and it's screwed up and he probably shouldn't, but he does trust Hannibal. He nods and kisses back with a touch more hesitation. Hannibal lets their lips linger pressed together, but nothing more. He lets Will set the pace.

Will backs off and takes a breath. Then he leans in again and plunges back into Hannibal. He presses their bodies together so close it feels as though they might merge together into one

being. He and Hannibal are moving again, stumbling up the stairs, down a hallway and into Hannibal's bedroom.

Will falls back into Hannibal bed and grabs onto Hannibal's shoulders, pulling him down with him. He grabs at Hannibal's belt and Hannibal obliges the unspoken request and pulls it off. Will shucks off his own pants with a bit of squirming and they're left in their underwear.

Hannibal hesitates and Will looks him in the eyes.

"I want this. I want you."

Hannibal nods and they're kissing again. Their tongues intertwined and Hannibal's body pressing heavily onto Will's.

When Will breaks away to breathe, Hannibal kisses at Will's neck. Nibbling and biting. Sucking a hickey into the skin and watching with satisfaction as the mark darkens and bruises.

Will's hands reach out hesitantly and he grabs hold of Hannibal's cock through the fabric of Hannibal's underwear. Hannibal arches back with a moan, his mouth briefly leaving Will's neck before he dives back in again and bites down hard, teeth breaking through Will's skin. The pain has Will seeing stars and unbidden a groan falls from his mouth.

Hannibal grins with bloody teeth and presses a gentle kiss to the bite he's given.

"Mine."

Will reaches up a hand to cradle Hannibal's face in his palms. He leans up to taste the salty iron of his own blood in Hannibal's mouth and when he pulls away he looks Hannibal in the eye, "yours," he agrees, "Forever and always yours." Hannibal lets out a growl and presses Will to the bed before leaning in to devour him.

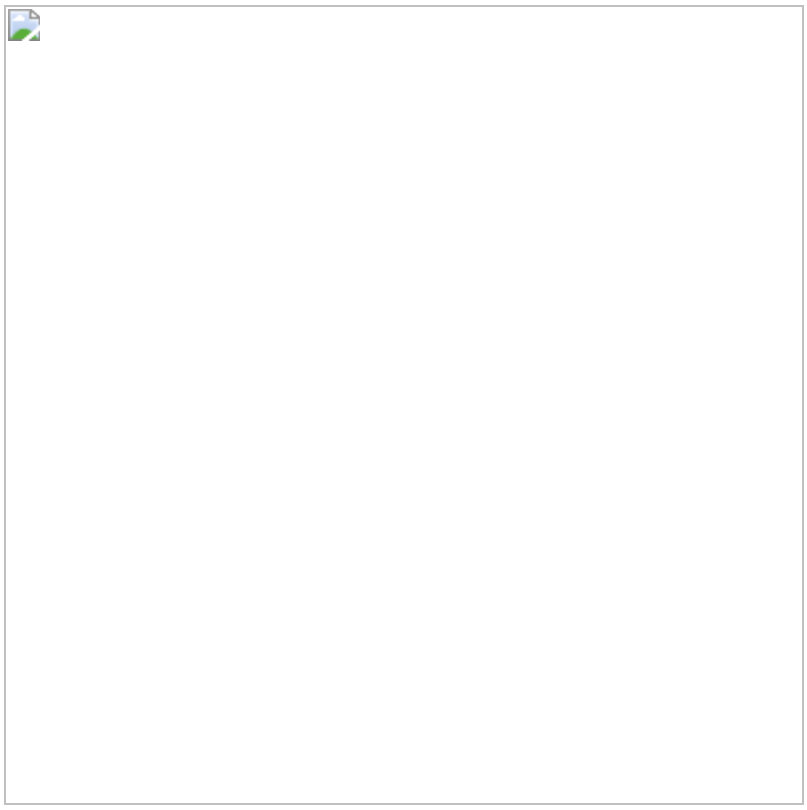
Will wakes up the next day laying naked with his limbs intertwined with Hannibal's. His head rests on the ravenstag's chest and he listens to his monster breathe in and out. The slow rise and fall is comforting, the hands that wrap around his body make him feel protected. He's slow to open his eyes, the light is dim through his eyelids and he wants everything to stay as it is for just another second. Dark and warm and safe. When he finally opens his eyes they glow a dark pomegranate red. When his lips curve into a smile it's a fanged grin. Not quite human. Not anymore.

Chapter End Notes

This is it! Just the epilogue left which I'll post next week! I don't know how I feel about this chapter since it's kind of all over the place, but I hope you guys liked the

conclusion!

Chapter 11



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When Frank finds Will's note on the fridge he stares at it for a few minutes before sticking it right back where he found it. He walks around the house and notes the clean dishes, the missing photograph, the untouched bedroom. He sighs. Where did he go wrong? How has he messed up so utterly that his son has left him?

He thinks back on when Will was little. He'd point at anything that interested him and ask, "What's that?"

And Frank would muster as much enthusiasm as possible as he said for the fourth time that day, "It's a clock, Will."

Then his kid would be off again, running towards something else he could point at, "What's that?"

"That's the door Will."

"What's that?" he'd ask as his little hands pressed against the glass and he stared out in curiosity.

"A window."

Over and over again. He was always so interested in learning everything that he could. He'd flip through books and have someone read them until he'd memorised all the words. He liked to collect cool rocks and attempt to imitate bird noises. He'd run around the house giggling with a stuffed animal clutched in his hands.

"Dad! Dad! Dad!" he'd yell out and Frank would chase after him, catch him, and swing him around in his arms.

Will would laugh, full belly laughs.

And it's true that kids grow up but Frank doesn't know the last time he heard Will laugh like that. He couldn't say what Will's newest obsession was or how he'd been doing in school. He knows that their house was empty of laughter long before Will left it.

Frank can't say why he doesn't immediately pick up his phone to alert the police of this new information. He knows that he should.

'I love you dad,' he reads again and Frank swallows down the lump in his throat. He wonders if things could've been different if he'd been home. If he'd left work early and seen his son. Been there to tell him, "I love you, too" and wonders if maybe that would've been enough.

Hypotheticals never helped anyone he decides eventually and turns away, leaving the note on the fridge as he starts to prepare dinner. He never calls the police to inform them.

A year passes and he lives with the absence of his son. The house still feels empty when he wakes up everyday and sometimes when he goes to sleep he finds himself hoping that he won't wake up again. But he always does.

He goes to work, eats dinner and keeps moving. He fake smiles and makes small talk and does what everyone expects him to. Eventually things do get better. He meets someone.

Not someone he sleeps with, not someone he dates, but a guy at the park who also likes to go fishing and is into old folk songs. His wife is still around and they have two daughters, one of them only a year older than Will. Their friendship is small, but Frank finds himself laughing at a few bad jokes and for the first time in a while looks up and can appreciate the sun that shines overhead and the early spring bulbs popping up in his neighbour's flower beds.

He starts singing along to radio music again. He fixes motors. He watches a couple of sports games at the pub in town surrounded by other people. He calls up his sister, still alive despite all the years that have passed, and they talk on the phone for a while. He hadn't seen her in almost a decade. It's good to hear a familiar voice.

But as he feels more alive, the house feels more dead. When he comes home to the empty rooms, the things that once belonged to his son and his wife shoved away in corners, he feels like he's drowning all over again. He cries in the shower. He puts a gun to his head and thinks about taking the shot. There are good days and there are bad, but Frank never pulls that trigger. He keeps going.

At the end of the year he finally decides that he needs to sell the house. He needs to get away from all the bad memories. A fresh start. Somewhere he can live without being surrounded by so many reminders of the gone. He puts the house up for sale on a Thursday and on that Saturday he has his first house tour.

A few couples come in and walk around. They parade through the home criticising the bathroom window that never quite closes and the closet doors that squeak and the crack in the tiles of the kitchen. He feels stripped bare and exposed. He answers their questions anyway.

The open house is winding down when the door opens and through it walks a familiar figure.

He sets his glass down shakily, “Will?”

The young man turns, the face eerily familiar, but Frank lets out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. It’s similar, but wrong.

This man’s face is sharper than Will’s ever was, his jaw more defined. A faint smattering of stubble, a little more than a five oclock shadow decorates his chin. Even if that might’ve been explainable by the age, Will had blue eyes, the man who faces him now has red ones. Will was a clumsy and awkward kid, the man before him moves fluidly, he stalks forward with a cocky half smile. He meets Frank’s eye.

“You must be the owner? Frank, is it?”

Frank nods, “yeah, uh, sorry, you just reminded me of someone. Are you looking to buy?”

“Yes, yes we are,” a second man chimes in, coming up from behind and wrapping a possessive arm around the boy’s waist, “you have a lovely home.”

“Thank you,” he feels as though he should say something more, but he’s distracted watching the man who looks so much like his son.

“Hannibal Lecter” the man says and sticks out his hand to shake Frank’s, “and this is my fiance, Azrael Smith.”

“Azrael? Interesting name,” Frank grasps Hannibal’s hand and shakes it firmly, “It’s nice to meet you two.”

“Nice to meet you too, Mr. Graham. What do you do around here?” Hannibal asks.

“I work as a mechanic, but I fish on the weekends if you’re talking about stuff like that.”

“As it happens my fiance is a big fan of fishing.”

“Really? Well everyone around here fishes in Wolf Trap Creek, but if you’re looking for something a bit bigger I’d recommend Spring Lake.”

“Is the snow cone shack still there?” Azreal chimes in sounding wistful.

Frank turns to really look at him, “Just in the summers. Hasn’t closed down yet. Did you grow up around here?”

“Something like that.”

“Huh. Looking to move back home then?”

“Couldn’t stay away forever.” Azreal responds and Frank accepts that answer with a nod before offering to give them a full tour himself. A few days later the house is sold to Mr. Lecter and Mr. Smith. Frank drives away in a moving van with a smile on his face and the radio playing loudly. He feels like he can truly breathe. Finally free of it all.

Behind him, standing in front of their new home, Mr. Lecter turns to Mr. Smith,“It’s a beautiful home, Will.”

“I know,” Will says with a smile and turns to look his fiance in the eye, “a beautiful home for a fresh start.”

“A fresh start? It seems more as though things have looped back to where they’ve begun. Time has a funny way of doing that.”

“Better. Better than when things began. I have you at my side now.”

“You have me at your side now and forever.”

Will leans forward to kiss Hannibal.

“I think this calls for a drink,” Will announces when he pulls away and grabs Hannibal’s hand to pull him inside. He picks up a bottle of champagne and gets two wine glasses from the cupboard. Will rolls his eyes at Hannibal’s look of dismay when he pours the, now close to room temperature, champagne into the wide wine glasses. He hands one to Hannibal who takes it dutifully.

Will holds up his cup, “To beginnings and endings. To life and death. And most importantly to us.”

“To us,” Hannibal agrees and they toast to it.

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